

# Black and Asian Theatre in Britain

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A History

**Edited by Colin Chambers**

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## Chapter 8

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### **‘All a we is English’**

Colin Chambers

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# 8

## 'ALL A WE IS ENGLISH'<sup>1</sup>

Britain under Conservative rule in the 1980s and for much of the 1990s saw black and Asian theatre wax and then wane, its growth the result of earlier forces' coming to a head and its falling away a consequence of cuts allied to a state-driven cultural project that celebrated the individual over the collective and gave renewed impetus to aggressive, narrow nationalism. How to survive while simultaneously asserting the heterodox, hybrid nature of non-white theatre and its contribution to British theatre was the urgent challenge.

Within two years of the Thatcher government's election to power in 1979, Britain saw perhaps the most serious rioting of its postwar era, which led to major developments in public diversity policy, though less significant change at the level of delivery. The black community could no longer be taken for granted and was demanding its rights as British citizens. The theatre group that epitomized this new urgency and resilience and the need to adapt to survive was the Black Theatre Co-operative (BTC).<sup>2</sup> The group was founded by Mustapha Matura and white director Charlie Hanson in 1978 after Hanson had failed to interest any theatres in *Welcome Home Jacko*, despite Matura's standing as the leading black playwright of his generation. Under the BTC label, Hanson staged a lunchtime Matura double bill *More, More* and *Another Tuesday* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts before launching *Welcome Home Jacko* with an Arts Council project grant.<sup>3</sup> The production opened at the Factory in west London in May 1979 and toured to venues such as the Riverside Studios, the Sheffield Crucible, and the Theatre Royal Stratford East and also venues in the United States and continental Europe, including an appearance at the Théâtre des Nations festival in Amsterdam.

The play, set in an inner-city youth club adorned with images of Africa and Haile Selassie, focuses on the return of Jacko after five years in jail for rape, hailed as a hero for not having informed on others. He sees himself differently, however, and openly challenges the rhetoric and illusions of the young men. Though the portrayal of

the young Rastafarians angered some, the play was very popular, attracting a new urban youth audience. A television producer saw the production and commissioned what became *No Problem*, one of the first black series to be broadcast at prime time. *Jacko* was given its edge in performance by actors who had helped turn Matura's language into authentic street expression, representing a texture, vocabulary, and rhythm belonging to those who were born or raised in Britain rather than the older diasporic emigrants.<sup>4</sup> The BTC led a reinvigoration of black theatre with its muscular, dynamic style of realism and sharp humour, which represented a shift that changed the nature of black theatre and its relationship to Britain and to heritage.

Like earlier ventures, the BTC aimed to provide opportunities in a range of skills, including those of writer, performer, director, producer, theatre technician, and administrator. Unlike earlier ventures, however, it was also able to acknowledge the existence of an indigenous black British theatre exemplified by the presence of black writers and a new generation of actors such as Brian Bovell, Burt Caesar, Gordon Case, Victor Romero Evans, Malcolm Frederick, Judith Jacob, Trevor Laird, and Chris Tummings. The BTC, which won its first Arts Council annual grant in 1984, was prolific, averaging about four shows a year in its first half decade. The BTC was at the start controlled by its pool of artists, who elected a six-strong committee to oversee the company, which offered a broad range of repertoire from new writing and revivals to opera and hip-hop performance. This repertoire included Farrukh Dhondy's *Mama Dragon* (1980), *Shapesters* (1980, which was seen at the National Theatre and the Third World Festival, Korea) and *Trojans* (1981); Matura's *One Rule* (1981); Edgar White's *Trinity* (1982), *The Nine Night* (1983), *Redemption Song* (1984), and *Ritual* (1985); a revival of Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* (1983); Steve Carter's *Nevis Mountain Dew* (1983); Frank McField's *No Place to Be Nice* (1984); Jacqueline Rudet's *Money to Live* (1984); and a revival of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1985). Yemi Ajibade's *Waiting for Hannibal* (1986) achieved one of the company's aims in having a black stage manager and assistant stage manager (both women).

The collective nature of the group was not sustained; Charlie Hanson became artistic director and, when he left to pursue his career in television, Malcolm Frederick took over and was later replaced by Joan-Ann Maynard. By this time in the early 1990s, the BTC found it could afford only one commission a year, which limited growth through a necessary commitment to planning round unknown work. The BTC, which had become Britain's (and Europe's) longest-surviving black theatre company, tried to break from this model and, in 1996, appointed Felix Cross as artistic director to carry through the transition. Cross, playwright and director but best known as a widely produced composer and lyricist of shows such as *Blues for Railton* and *Glory!*, instituted an annual beat festival and renamed the company Nitro in 1999 to begin a new phase in its life, concentrating on black British musical theatre.

The Factory, the first home of the BTC, was in many ways a west London Keskidee, a centre for the local community, in this case run by a Neighbourhood Residents Association. Founded in 1974, it was a calypso centre and housed the Paddington Print Workshop, Paddington Dark Room, Soucouyant Carnival

Club, and the Paddington Youth Steel Band, which won many of the early pan competitions in Notting Hill. The Factory was refurbished for the BTC and, in 1986, it became the Yaa Asantewaa Centre. In 1997, it began producing a season of short plays that, like its carnival programme, included international involvement. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the Yaa launched its first national and European Carnival Theatre tour and an accredited training programme for carnival artists and collaborated with Cultural Exchange Through Theatre In Education to create a new carnival theatre piece called *Dear Comrade*, based on the life and work of Carnival pioneer Claudia Jones.<sup>5</sup> Many similar centres around the country came and went, trying to carry out similar, under-reported activities at local level, for example, in south London, Umoja's The Base, or in Birmingham the CAVE, the Drum, the Midlands Arts Centre, and Nu Century Arts.

The theatrical achievements of the 1970s were developed in the 1980s with increased institutional backing, part of a wave of activity on many fronts – political, social, and cultural – mainly at community level, and also in other live arts and in cinema, poetry, and fiction. Non-white artists, particularly those born or raised in Britain, were going beyond the underlying notions of the previous period in exploring the meaning of difference, of being black, and trying to resolve the seemingly inescapable tension forced on black theatre between art and social work. Like their white counterparts, in a globalized, post-modern era, they wanted to discover new ways of being politically and artistically active without losing any sense of – indeed as part of finding – their distinctive identity. Many continued to wish to be considered as artists rather than as black or Asian artists. Whatever the problems with funding, which was never generous for minorities – and cuts hit them the hardest – black theatre was now recognized as a distinct phenomenon. Funders with differing degrees of persuasion and effect insisted non-diasporic clients at local, regional, or national level take diasporic theatre of colour seriously.

For diasporic theatre, the term *black* was replacing *ethnic minority* or *ethnic* and, in recognition of its political rather than literal meaning, came in the 1980s to carry an uppercase *B* to embrace all non-white theatre regardless of geography, history, or origin and to signify the common problems faced in a white culture still scarred by racism. The uppercase *B* also signified confidence and the ability of Black theatre to make demands on its own terms as it developed its own aesthetic. This was distinguished by a focused energy, whether drawing on the observations of naturalism, as writers such as Matura, Tunde Ikoli, and Caryl Phillips were doing, or non-naturalistic techniques promoted by writers such as the African-American Ntosake Shange in her choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, which was seen in London in 1979, or the dub poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson, which sounded a new note of angry resistance.

Under the Black theatre umbrella could be found an astonishing diversity – exemplified by a range of groups from the BTC, Carib Theatre, Tara, Temba, and Umoja to Black Mime Theatre, Double Edge, Options Ltd, Roots Theatre, Theatre of Black Women, and Unlock the Chains. Such groups and the many others not listed here invigorated the British theatre in the 1980s through a

remarkable rise and spread in activity. This spread could be seen geographically and in range, identity, the presence of black performers and playwrights, and the number and publication of plays, not just by individual writers but as volumes of black and Asian plays.<sup>6</sup> Outlets such as the Africa Centre, Commonwealth Institute, and Nehru Centre (the cultural wing of the Indian High Commission), which occasionally presented plays, were supplemented by the arts centre circuit and a new diversity awareness in venues such as Contact, Derby Playhouse, Drill Hall, Hackney Empire, the ICA, Oval House, Riverside, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Tricycle, and Young Vic. Programmes were launched at venues such as the Birmingham Rep and West Yorkshire Playhouse to help develop black and Asian artists, and several were aimed at young people, as at the Theatre Centre and the Royal Court.<sup>7</sup>

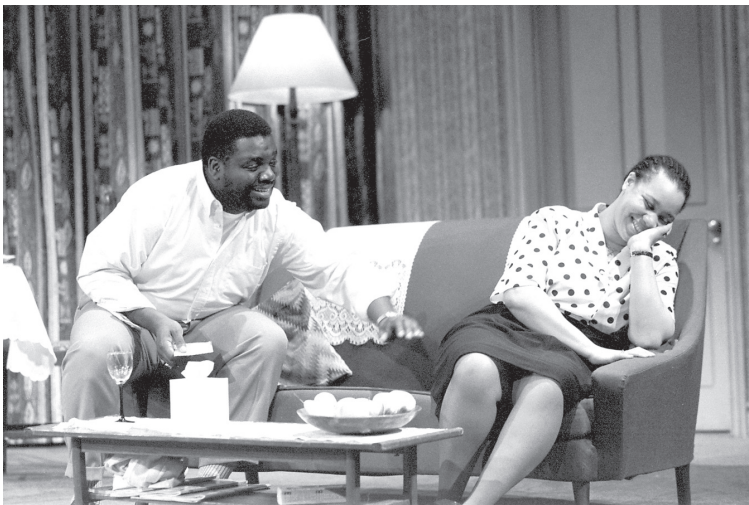
A new feature was the higher visibility of women, who have always been important but more so until the late 1980s in the African-Caribbean rather than the Asian strand, which is dealt with in the previous chapter.<sup>8</sup> The pioneers were women such as Una Marson from the 1930s, then postwar, Pearl Connor and Yvonne Brewster and a core of black actors, such as Nina Baden-Semper, Nadia Cattouse, Mona Hammond, Pauline Henriques, Carmen Munroe, Ida Shepley, and Corinne Skinner-Carter. To take a few examples from the 1980s: Gloria Hamilton founded Umoja in 1983, Talawa was founded by four women in 1985, and Denise Wong, a founder member of the Black Mime Troupe, became its artistic director in 1986. With the rise of feminism came a new consciousness regarding the need not only for specifically gendered groups but for non-white ones as well, such as the Black Women's Group and Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent. This development was reflected in theatre: black theatre and white were male-dominated, and roles for women were often subsidiary and less well written than male roles. In 1982, the Theatre of Black Women (TBW) was formed, to be followed by groups such as Imani-Faith, founded by Jacqueline Rudet; Munirah; the Black Mime Women's Troupe, which initiated the Black Women's Theatre Project; the Bemarro Sisters; Siren; and Assati in Liverpool. Companies such as Sistren, a Jamaican collective of mainly former street cleaners, offered inspiration through visits and publications.<sup>9</sup>

The most important of these groups, the TBW, had been created when its founders, Bernadine Evaristo, Patricia Hilaire, and Paulette Randall, were at Rose Bruford working on a play called *Coping*, which concerns the lives of five different women. Directed by Yvonne Brewster, it toured to small venues and became the basis of the TBW, which, according to Lynette Goddard, was the only professional black women's company to receive public subsidy.<sup>10</sup> The first TBW show comprised three one-woman plays: Evaristo's *Tiger Teeth Clenched Not to Bite*, Hilaire's *Hey Brown Girl*, and Randall's *Chameleon*. In the second production, *Silhouette* (1983) by Hilaire and Evaristo, a mixed-heritage black woman meets the spirit of a black woman who had died in slavery two centuries before. The TBW followed this with Evaristo's *Pyeyucca*, (1984, with additional material by Hilaire); Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* (1986); a musical *Miss Quashie and the Tiger's Tail* by Gabriela and Jean Pearse (1987); and

Ruth Harris's *The Cripple* (1987) about a woman with cerebral palsy. By the end of the decade, the company had lost its grant and folded.

A network of workshops had arisen focused on developing women's skills and aimed in particular at playwrights. The number of non-white female writers grew, from the likes of Lissele Kayla, Winsome Pinnock, and Maria Oshodi to Yazmine Judd, Jenny McLeod, Zindika and, in the twenty-first century, debbie tucker green and Bola Agbaje. They became a force in the theatrical world beyond the confines of the black and Asian groups, bringing fresh aesthetic strategies in their challenging plays. Besides offering new perspectives on history, memory, migration, generational difference, and what it means to be British, these playwrights dealt with the once taboo and still sensitive issue of lesbian sexuality in a wider exploration of identity formed in a world with many layers of hostility. In *Chiaroscuro*, for example, Kay balances poetry and naturalistic dialogue in a collage form that allows a dynamic investigation of subjectivity through the interaction of four actors, whose friendship is tested and reaffirmed in the face of racism, sexism, and anti-lesbian sentiment. In formal contrast, Rudet's *Basin* (Temba, 1987), set in a young black woman's inner-city flat, explores sisterhood and survival in a more realistic style.

It was not until 1995, however, that a black woman had a play shown at either of the national theatres. A National Theatre Mobile revival of Winsome Pinnock's *Leave Taking*, which had premièred at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1988, came to the Cottesloe Theatre. Also using realism to great effect, Pinnock, a major writer, looks at the tensions between a mother, who was unable to say goodbye to her mother when she left the Caribbean, and her two daughters, whom she has had to bring up in Britain alone by working as a cleaner. She raises the girls to love England but knows that in England a black woman is 'less than nuttin'.<sup>11</sup>



**FIGURE 8.1** David Webber and Jenni George in National Theatre Mobile production of *Leave Taking* by Winsome Pinnock, 1995 (Production image © Richard Hubert Smith)

## State funding

The general mushrooming of black and Asian theatre activity in the 1980s brought new ambitions to the fore and raised new demands of the state and its agencies. In response, they issued a mass of publications, at national, regional, and local level and through interest groups, inquiring into the situation of what many still called 'ethnic minority arts'. Black and Asian theatre, as part of a larger fringe and alternative movement, argued its particular case and gained much needed backing, but there was continuing unease at the compromises involved in operating within white theatre terms as against creating an autonomous theatre on one's own terms, though the two were rarely as distinct as this opposition suggests. Complicity with a discriminatory system risked loss of identity through assimilation and continued marginalization in return for subsidy and possible access to larger audiences, whereas the autonomous route offered a pure but diminishing and 'ghetto' existence that left the levers of cultural power in white hands. The point had not been reached wherein the debate could transcend perceptions of race and be undertaken primarily if not entirely in terms of art. For black and Asian artists, there was inevitably a tension with the power-brokers in British culture, who operated by narrow and constricting categories and often used this to deny or restrict access. Artists who did not wish to fit into the available slots (by telling stories from the front line, for example) often became isolated, looked abroad for work, or tried other genres.

State funding remained crucial to the expansion of black and Asian activity, but it also represented an obstacle course. Funding was at first denied or severely restricted because ethnic minority theatre was seen as amateur or community activity (community arts in urban centres remained a euphemism for African, Caribbean, or Asian arts into the 1990s). Subsequently, funding was limited because ethnic minority theatre was still deemed marginal and not professional enough, a Catch 22 parallel to that of black actors who found themselves refused work through lack of work. When funding was awarded, recipients often saw it as a method of dependency control, so that when the money was reduced or cut, they found it hard or impossible to survive. The funding system was not uniform, however. There were differences within and between national, regional, and local levels, and there were many within the system who fought to support black and Asian theatre. Yet, as a whole, the system was criticized as being designed to fail black and Asian theatre and for a general lack of trust in diasporic artists.<sup>12</sup> The groups mainly had to rely on short-term grants, and those were not quite enough. It was nearly impossible for the majority of groups to plan ahead and offer a consistent programme and, because most of the groups toured, the under-funding made it hard to attract the best actors, who could earn more in television and film and would not be adequately compensated for being away from the capital where such work was mostly found. Aspiration was often limited by the conditions of the grants, which frequently reflected the role the funders wanted to give black theatre, producing work the funders deemed appropriate instead of what the practitioners themselves wanted. For the funders, the representative rather than the artistic aspect of black and Asian

theatre remained uppermost, a hangover from the early days when it was regarded as a quaint and exotic, if worthy, community welfare service.

Funders feared that ethnically based groups would appeal only to their own constituencies but then funded them to do just that. Paradoxically, funders and power brokers also feared the very thing they promoted, that black and Asian artists were race-obsessed and that, given more leverage, would sponsor diasporic culture to the exclusion of all else. Though some in the diasporic community confirmed the narrow expectations of the funders through an understandable mistrust of the cultural system and a desire to reflect directly and uncompromisingly the tough experience of being black in Britain, groups such as Temba that openly tried to engage with the dominant theatrical tradition were penalized. Attempts within black and Asian theatre to develop from the earlier phase that had been strongly motivated by socio-political intent and stressed anti-racism, found the ability to experiment and create a specific diasporic aesthetic severely constrained. As state funding shrank and became more competitive and other sources of funding were similarly hard to obtain, funders cut black and Asian theatre for lack of quality, poor management, and failure to gain new audiences. Nevertheless, despite manifold setbacks, black and Asian theatre continued with remarkable exuberance, displaying a buoyancy that often proved to be out of step with capacity to deliver. Strategies had to be deployed that rebutted the racism of the white system yet kept black and Asian theatre and artists supported by state agencies while at the same time finding space to follow an autonomous agenda.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1980s and into the 1990s and beyond, official arts policy moved slowly and inconsistently from multiculturalism toward cultural diversity, and the Conservative government began a policy of devolution as part of rolling back the state, a policy that destroyed a fair amount of Britain's theatre infrastructure and concentrated declining resources in regional buildings, the gatekeepers of which were white.<sup>14</sup> Cuts hit all sectors but the under-represented black and Asian theatre the hardest. In the mid-1980s, the official Arts Council approach as laid out in *The Glory of the Garden* ignored the specific needs of black and Asian theatre while supporting ethnic arts in general. At this time, the Arts Council decided to give ethnic arts a higher profile and established an Ethnic Arts Unit, which launched a two-year plan along with a monitoring committee to report upon its progress. The target was for four per cent of funding to go to ethnic arts but, despite significant gains, the absence of a coherent strategy meant there was no sustainable growth.<sup>15</sup> The Unit lasted until the end of the decade, when it was replaced by the Arts Access Unit and subsequently the Cultural Diversity Unit when the government asked for a review of minority arts. This has been followed by various diversity initiatives, such as the Decibel programme in 2003–2004, reinforcing the place of diversity within and across the system but also leaving the notion of diversity ill-defined and often out of kilter with particular needs.

Running through this history of engagement with diversity is an international civic agenda that supports diasporic or minority arts. *The Arts Britain Ignores*, for example, was published in the wake of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement, signed by



thirty-five states in an attempt to overcome Cold War divisions, which calls for the continuation and development of ethnic minority arts. UNESCO later introduced the concept of the shared space, which was embraced by the Arts Council and, in 1997, the British Council launched 'Re-Inventing Britain', a project that looked at how very different British identities are being formed and re-formed across and between cultures. Naseem Khan, a central figure in the debate, notes that funding for black and Asian arts increased in the 1990s but the number of companies declined. Britain's record of support is admired in many European countries, yet Britain has not been able to sustain major non-white developments.<sup>16</sup>

The situation in the 1980s represented a classic British double act of giving with one hand while taking away with the other, familiar from the history of liberal civil rights legislation accompanying restrictive nationality and immigration laws.<sup>17</sup> Central government promised post-riots support but devolved implementation to the local level, confirming both the marginal status of such projects, as Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have said, and the identification of community as a euphemism for the diaspora.<sup>18</sup> One result was a collision between monetarism and municipal social democracy, especially in London through the Labour-led Greater London Council (GLC), which mounted several attempts to honour a commitment to disadvantaged groups.<sup>19</sup> This clash was also a struggle between notions of culture, which, in terms of state structures, pitted the slow democratization of culture (top down), as advocated by the liberal elite, against cultural democracy (bottom up), as advocated by many alternative companies and artists.

Multiculturalism fostered at state level reinforced separate identities and fractured the notion of Black theatre as a unified force or movement. The cultural diversity agenda that followed lacked a central focus, and its relativism played to inherent strengths and weaknesses within the various diasporic groups. In this trajectory, there is a continuing but different interplay between the individual and the collective. Both have borne the burden of having to explain the Other to the host society, a burden created both within the diasporic communities and without. In the 1970s, there was an historic need for collective and individual diasporic identity, but the collective inevitably restricts while also empowering the individual. With the increase in British-born artists in a social context that promotes individual achievement, this interchange between the individual and the collective and between the mainstream and the grassroots shifts again. The tension is played out in the power struggles that determine British cultural and theatre politics regardless of the perceived needs of diasporic heritage and its future expression.

### **Key projects of the 1980s**

Two projects crystallized the new diasporic ambition of the 1980s and the tensions that accompanied such ambition: the project to create a national black theatre centre at the Roundhouse and the formation of the Black Theatre Forum (BTF), which presented annual seasons of black and Asian theatre in established venues. Energy veered from the BTF to the Roundhouse and back as at first one then the

other project appeared to offer the best chance of successful outcomes. The two projects ran in parallel, with one focusing on the acquisition of a building, the other on presenting a showcase within the domain of white culture. Both became possible because of the GLC, which had returned to Labour under the radical Ken Livingstone in 1981. The force that was gathering in diasporic theatre now found an audience in local government. The GLC's Arts and Recreation Committee (under future Sport and Heritage Minister Tony Banks) increased spending on the arts and, in particular, community arts, helping many groups to sustain their productivity and gain the experience necessary to win Arts Council funding. The Committee recognised and promoted the multicultural nature of London and allowed its agenda to be shaped by the communities it was serving through its Ethnic Arts Sub-Committee.

The call for a national centre was heard at the subcommittee's Ethnic Arts Consultative Conference in 1982 and, with Camden Council, a successful bid for the Roundhouse was made by the GLC. Gaining a building had remained an ambition of diasporic theatre since the 1930s. The NTW in the 1960s had hoped to secure one, as had Drum in the 1970s. Dark and Light had one briefly, and Keskidee, though aimed at a local community, acted like a national centre through ownership of its building. There were arguments, often fierce, for and against the value of a building: contending merits were scrutinized and weighed, of local versus national, permanence versus touring, autonomy versus ghettoization, and the single consumption of resources against spreading them widely. A building would be symbolic, but it could be symbolic of both good and bad. It might create an elite and narrow appeal, yet, perhaps as a single focus, it could achieve a high profile and generate more creativity among more artists. There was concern about the size of the building: if it were too small it might be manageable but it would not provide sufficient box office income for it to be sustainable; too large and it would be difficult to find a repertoire that could fill it. The main anxiety was that a national centre would prevent individual groups' acquiring their own premises and would not be able to respond to and represent the diversity of performance traditions and styles that was one of black and Asian theatre's chief features. Such disputation was not particular to diasporic culture but, in the absence of any major local, let alone national, theatre building under diasporic control, the debate was necessarily more urgent.

The building chosen was iconic for counter-culture. The Roundhouse in Camden, north London had been home to the labour movement-backed arts initiative Centre 42 in the mid-1960s, had hosted the Dialectics of Liberation conference in 1967 at which Stokely Carmichael had spoken, and had enjoyed celebrated visits at the cutting edge of theatre and culture by the likes of Peter Brook, Jean-Louis Barrault, Living Theater, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Pink Floyd. Unlike attempts in the past, such as Drum, the Roundhouse plan had the backing of the local council (to buy the building), the GLC (to cover running costs), and the Arts Council (to contribute to project costs). Architects drew up a feasibility study, a board was put in place, and there appeared to be a collective will for success.

Ambition was set high, with talk of the centre occupying the commanding heights of culture such as the National Theatre.

Thatcher's destruction of the GLC in 1986 was a major blow, which was followed by criticism of the board, the management and the scheme's director from within the African, Asian, and Caribbean artistic community and from without.<sup>20</sup> Local resistance, internal rows, and financial problems called the plan into doubt and, with the GLC gone, institutional backing weakened. At the end of the decade, although plans were still in place for a two-theatre centre, with an exhibition gallery, cinema, and restaurant, it was no longer to be a black arts centre but a multicultural one with a black arts trust developing diasporic arts there. At the start of the new decade, the Arts Council withheld its contribution, and the project collapsed. The Roundhouse was eventually refurbished and reopened as a performance venue in 2006 with Arts Council backing but no specific diasporic dimension.

There was a twist to the Roundhouse saga in the story of Double Edge, formed in 1984 by two former Rose Bruford students, Derrick Blackwood and Clarence Smith, who were working from their front rooms.<sup>21</sup> Their first show, *Johnny was a Good Man*, a portrait of heroin addiction, was included in Camden Council's drug education campaign. They moved on a temporary basis to a small space in Kentish Town, north London but needed a permanent and larger space. They approached the Roundhouse, unsuccessfully, and the Camden Council, which offered them the choice of a portakabin or, if they found their own premises, financial aid. Faced with imminent homelessness, they occupied a disused church building and faced a struggle with church authorities to avoid eviction. The group set up Camden United Theatre there to secure the building as an arts centre while the Roundhouse project was still in limbo. They organized a series of events in 1986, which included a performing arts festival, a jazz programme, the première of *The Balmyard* by Staunch Poets and Players, *Burning Embers* by the Azanaian National Theatre from the Edinburgh Festival, and Double Edge's own *Song of Songs*. The following year the company was offered the building and, in 1990, Amani Naphtali wrote and directed one of the group's outstanding shows, *Ragamuffin*, inspired by C. L. R. James's *The Black Jacobins*. Linking the Broadwater Farm revolt in Tottenham, north London to the San Domingo revolution, a rap and reggae trial of a mythological street warrior used call and response with the audience for and against the defendant in a vibrant and visceral show that captured the mood of urban protest spreading throughout black youth.

The other great mid-1980s project, the Black Theatre Forum and its annual Black Theatre seasons, was a reminder to funders that black theatre did know how to organize and administer and had an important presence that needed to be recognised not only by increased grants but with a national centre. An annual season was also a way of overcoming the short-term nature of much black theatre activity, which was a consequence of the funding system, a system the BTF hoped to alter through the success of its seasons. The first season came about after Jamaican actor and director Anton Phillips had meetings in 1983 with Parminder Vir, the GLC's Ethnic Arts Adviser, to work out a development policy for black theatre that might be adopted

by the GLC.<sup>22</sup> Phillips, an important figure in British diasporic theatre who had studied drama in New York and at Rose Bruford, ran the Carib Theatre that he had founded with Yvonne Brewster two years before.<sup>23</sup> He proposed to Vir a season at the Arts Theatre, a small venue seating just more than 300 in central London and known for its innovative repertoire.<sup>24</sup> In his grant application to the GLC, Phillips wrote: 'Our objectives are to present plays of a high professional standard to as wide an audience as possible. Also to assert that Black Theatre has a right to be seen in the best venues.'<sup>25</sup> Funding was granted, but the amount awarded prevented commissioning work and only allowed groups to be invited that had shows already prepared. The season had restricted access to the Arts because the theatre was being used during the day by the resident children's theatre company. There was also a problem recruiting a press officer from the diasporic communities, so Phillips set up a traineeship.

The first season, which ran from October to December 1983, comprised four shows: from BTC, *Nevis Mountain Dew* by African American Steve Carter, directed by Rufus Collins and first produced by New York's Negro Ensemble Company; from Inventory Productions, the première of *Two Can Play* by Jamaican Trevor Rhone, which Phillips directed; from Carib Theatre, a revival of *The Outlaw* by Michael Abbensetts, directed by Robert Gillespie; and from Black Woman Time Now, *Fishing* by Paulette Randall, directed by Yvonne Brewster, which had been seen in 1982 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. *Fishing*, an exploration of life as a black woman, toured London, and *Two Can Play*, a touching play set in Kingston, Jamaica about a couple's relationship changing after the wife returns with new ideas from a trip to the United States, transferred to the Theatre Royal Stratford East. The aim of the season was familiar – to offer opportunity for practising skills – but the context was different because of the venue that, though not a major West End theatre, was within the mainstream and boasted a profile with which most current black and Asian theatre had not been associated before. The season offered a selection of contrasting plays performed by leading diasporic actors and was targeted at getting diasporic audiences into the centre of the capital (and paying more than they would be used to) while attracting white audiences who might not normally see such work. As Alda Terracciano says: '...it was a case of subverting the expectations of the public as the plays neither followed in the footsteps of light comedy and musicals, as is usually the case on the West End stage, nor the "highbrow" choice of theatres like the Royal Court'.<sup>26</sup>

Despite spending much of the budget on advertising and the shows receiving generally favourable notices, the audience figures were poor. Nevertheless, Phillips felt emboldened to plan a second season, this time with a different publicity approach that would target community venues and areas with large black populations through the diasporic press and commercial radio. He submitted an application to the GLC in 1984 and established a company to administer it. Opening in January 1985, the second season offered only three plays: a revised version of Tunde Ikoli's *Scrape Off the Black* from Temba, directed by Alby James; Farrukh Dhondy's *Vigilantes* from the Asian Theatre Co-operative, directed by Penny Cherns; and a Carib Theatre production of

*The New Hardware Store* by Earl Lovelace, directed by Yvonne Brewster, dealing with post-independence Trinidad. Overall box office income doubled, and the success of *Vigilantes*, which deals with a group of young Asians trying to defend their community from racist attack, showed that young audiences could be attracted with the right material and marketing.

As the second season was opening, Phillips convened a meeting of diasporic companies to draw up a policy that could be put to the GLC's Ethnic Arts Subcommittee. This group, with representatives from the BTC (Beverly Randall); Staunch Poets and Players (Don Kinch); Talawa (Yvonne Brewster); Tara (Jatinder Verma); and Temba (Alby James) as well as Phillips from Carib Theatre and Parminder Vir from the GLC, became the core of the Black Theatre Alliance, which developed into the BTF. Subsequently, representatives joined from the Asian Theatre Co-operative (Harmage Kalirai); British Asian Theatre Company (Dhirendra); and Umoja (Gloria Hamilton), along with Joe Marcell from the Roundhouse to help coordinate the strategies of the two projects. At its height, the BTF embraced seventeen companies. Differences within the BTF were vigorously debated, and a common approach was hard to find. In 1985, the Asian Theatre Co-operative, British Asian Theatre, and Tara formed the Asian Theatre Forum, and questions continued to be raised about the dilemma of labelling: *Black* had been adopted as a political term of common resistance to common problems of discrimination, but it also had the disadvantage of evening out differences in culture and submerging identity. The BTF's plans to collaborate with the Roundhouse were dropped because of differences in artistic perspective, and the BTF made a bid to buy the Arts Theatre, which failed owing to lack of support from the GLC.

Different opinions were also expressed about the nature of the third season: should it be experimental or conventional? A proposal to move to the Royal Court was abandoned because the theatre would not relinquish its right to decide on the repertoire. The BTF agreed on a plan with the GLC to tour more and created a four-strong artistic committee with equal representation from those of Caribbean and Asian descent to run the season. With more emphasis on roots and cross-cultural influences in the choice of repertoire, a decision was taken to use greater resources in order to increase cast sizes, offer live music, enhance publicity and lower ticket prices. The season, which stayed at the Arts Theatre, comprised two Sanskrit classics: Shudraka's *The Little Clay Cart* presented by Tara under Jatinder Verma's direction; Visakhadatta's *Rākshasa's Ring*, the direction of which Anton Phillips had to take over from Rufus Collins at the last minute; and a Jamaican pantomime, *The Pirate Princess* by Barbara Gloudon, presented by Temba with new music by Felix Cross. Both *The Little Clay Cart* and *The Pirate Princess*, which was directed by Alby James and Paulette Randall and recorded the best box office income of the season, were successful reworkings of other traditions in a British theatrical context.

Tension grew within the BTF not only between the Asian and Caribbean strands but over policy: should the seasons pursue excellence as a way of raising the profile and thereby increasing opportunities for all diasporic theatre, or should they represent the diversity of groups as they existed? The BTF agreed to expand. SASS

Theatre Company, Double Edge, Afro-Sax, and L'Ouverture joined in 1987 and Theatre of Black Women, African Players, and Tenne Theatre Company in 1988. It was also agreed to hire a producer for the entire season, who would work alongside an expanded artistic committee to present all productions under the BTF banner, and to hire a director for each show. After the demise of the GLC, Greater London Arts (GLA) agreed to fund the season (£165,000) and make an annual revenue grant (of £22,000) to the BTF for the next five years.<sup>27</sup> In return, the BTF had to grow and make international links, coordinate a registry of black artists for outreach work, establish a centre for black artists, and set up a building centre appeal. Exchange between the BTF groups was fostered by the appointment of trainee directors, and plans were made for the publication of a journal. The quarterly *Frontseat* eventually appeared in 1995 and claimed to be Europe's only publication dedicated to black performance.

The fourth season in 1987, again at the Arts Theatre, offered two plays from the Caribbean – *Remembrance* by Derek Walcott, directed by Carmen Munroe, and *Moon Dance Night* by Edgar White, directed by Yvonne Brewster – and a modern Ethiopian play, *Tewodros*, by Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, directed by Jatinder Verma, about the unifying nineteenth-century Emperor of that name. The season drew an audience of nearly 7,000 and box office income of £17,500.<sup>28</sup> Prince Edward attended a gala of the White play, organized to raise money to buy a West End theatre for the BTF. As debate continued on the direction of the BTF, an executive was agreed in 1988 that would meet monthly and report to a board of directors, and classes and seminars were arranged to meet the criticism that the BTF was remote from the community. The BTF put in a bid to run the 500-seat Shaw Theatre, Euston, but lost out, though the owners insisted the BTF had the opportunity to mount its next season there. The format for this season remained similar, but, at GLA's insistence, the season was used to help develop directors. As the Arts was having licensing problems, the season opened at the Shaw in January 1989 with Paulette Randall directing *Dog* by Dennis Scott; John Matshikiza directing Walcott's farce *Beef, No Chicken* (which proved to be the most successful of all the seasons' shows at the box office); and actor Renu Setna directing a double bill of *Lazarus and his Beloved* by Lebanese writer Kahlil Gibran and *The Song of Death* by the Egyptian writer Tawfik El-Hakim. The BTF addressed issues of under-representation by initiating the New Writer's Project, in particular to increase the number of female and British playwrights, and by developing opportunities backstage, an area where few black people were to be found.

What turned out to be the final season, in 1990 at the Riverside Studios (the Shaw was not available), was produced by Anton Phillips and opened with a new play of community interest written by a woman, Maria Oshodi's *Blood, Sweat and Fears*, followed by two revivals: Jimi Rand's *Say Hallelujah* and *Eden* by Steve Carter. A survey of this season showed that seventy per cent of the audience was African-Caribbean, twenty-four per cent European, two per cent Asian, and four per cent other; fifty-six per cent were between the ages of 22 and 35, and sixty-three per cent were professionals.<sup>29</sup> A gala performance of *Blood, Sweat and Fears*

was held to raise money for research into sickle cell anaemia, the subject of the play and a disorder found disproportionately among those of African-Caribbean heritage. In contrast to the previous royal gala, this suggested a new direction toward community concerns, a direction taken up in a proposal put to GLA as the Roundhouse project collapsed to create an arts and media centre in Brixton named after C. L. R. James. In the process of making this submission, the BTF had not put forward proposals for the next Black Theatre season. When the bid for the centre was rejected, there were only a few days left to submit plans for the season and the BTF did not do so. GLA had already announced that the grant for the next season would have been cut back – the second time in two years, but this round of cuts was substantial – and that the considerable shortfall would have to be made up by sponsorship. When GLA was restructured to become the London Arts Board, the new body agreed to distribute the money previously allocated to the Black Theatre Season to other diasporic work, thereby ending the only regular showcase of black and Asian theatre and one under the control of the artists themselves.

The BTF's other activities continued, as it became an invaluable service to what was now a recognized sector within the arts industry. The BTF created an employment database and offered training and workshops on a range of subjects, in particular for writers and to explore the use of non-standard accents in performance. One project, 'React To', in conjunction with Crown Ten Productions, explored social exclusion and drug awareness and finished with a show at the Tricycle. The BTF ran the occasional reading, for example, of 'Biyi Bandele's *Death Catches the Hunter*, which led to a production by Wild Iris. The Forum also organized conferences, for instance, on arts administration and management and, in 1995, one called 'Future Histories'. This returned to the theme of developing a strategy for black theatre as a whole and laid the foundations for the creation of an archive of British African, Asian, and Caribbean performing arts. In 2001, a body taking the name Future Histories was established as a living repository, based on the BTF archive but initiating projects that preserved and disseminated the heritage through different media. By this point, the BTF, which the London Arts Board had wound down in the late 1990s, was closed.

Critical to the demise of both the Roundhouse and the Black Theatre seasons had been the abolition of the GLC by Thatcher's government in 1986. Though both projects survived, there was no representative body to fill the gap, and the regional funder, GLA, did not have the commitment to diasporic theatre shown by the GLC. Indeed, *In the Eye of the Needle*, a report in 1986 into GLA chaired by the director of the Institute of Race Relations Ambalavaner Sivanandan, found institutional racism and a failure to implement an effective black arts policy.<sup>30</sup> The momentum of black theatre in the 1980s stalled because of changes in the funding dispensation, and the absence of the GLC was critical in the closure of groups and the waning of activity. In its farewell year, however, the GLC ended on a flourish. It produced *The Black Experience*, a month-long arts programme of events, including concerts, talks, training days, a photographic exhibition, film shows, an oral history project and,

most important for the future of black theatre, the first production by Talawa Theatre Company.<sup>31</sup>

## Talawa

Yvonne Brewster, a leading figure in British black theatre, was approached in 1985 by Lord Birkett, chair of the GLC's Arts and Recreation Committee, when the fate of the parent body was known. He asked her to apply for money from the final grants that would be allocated to minority arts. The plan she submitted was to produce *The Black Jacobins* by C. L. R. James on what would be the fiftieth anniversary of its first production. With the actors Inigo Espejel, Mona Hammond, and Carmen Munroe, she founded Talawa to carry this out.

Brewster was born in Kingston, Jamaica with several cultures in her background: Jewish, Polish, Indian, and Cuban. She came to Britain in 1956 aged seventeen and soon discovered the obstacles of sexism, racism, and cultural tradition that she and others like her had to face. She studied at the Royal Academy of Music and Rose Bruford, where the principal told her she would never find work in the theatre. Brewster struggled there against the demands of Received Pronunciation, not because she could not affect it but because she thought it inappropriate.<sup>32</sup> She failed verse speaking one term for refusing to say the Blake line 'my soul is white'. Her first acting job came while still at college as a fairy in a pantomime at Colchester Rep. She returned to Jamaica and co-founded with Trevor Rhone the Barn Theatre. It was named after Lorca's university company, La Barraca (shack), which toured Spain, performing modern interpretations of classics, a motif that became a central part of Brewster's approach to drama and that of much diasporic theatre. She would visit England in the summers looking for plays and, in 1971, stayed to get married.

Her first production in Britain was a chastening experience. The Jamaica High Commission invited her to direct a London tour of Trevor Rhone's *Smile Orange* in 1972 to mark the tenth anniversary of Jamaican independence (an interesting choice as the play debunks the Caribbean tourist industry). The tour, which visited the Dark and Light, was probably the first such tour of a play by a black playwright with a black cast directed by a black director. Brewster says the audiences at the start of the run were miniscule but, by the end, many people who turned up were not able to get in. Their presence on the streets of what was seen as a 'white' part of London annoyed some of the local population, and the hall where the play was showing was burnt down, destroying all the props. The obvious conclusion, that the fire was arson, was officially ruled out.

After a brief return to the Caribbean in the mid-1970s, Brewster joined Bill Bryden's company at the National Theatre, became the Arts Council's first black Drama Officer (1982–1984), and picked up directing again (for example, Black Theatre Co-operative's revival of *A Raisin in the Sun* at the Tricycle, 1985). She continued directing outside Talawa after she became its artistic director. By the time she retired, besides having worked as an actor and director on TV, served on various boards, and edited three volumes of black plays, Brewster had directed



more than forty stage productions in the Caribbean, Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. Among her honours, she had received the OBE in 1993. She writes in her autobiography about the 'raffia' ceiling that bars black people from progress.<sup>33</sup> She did as much as any other single figure in postwar British black theatre to dent that ceiling, and much of the critical contribution she made came through the work of Talawa.

The name Talawa was chosen because of a Jamaican saying; 'Me lickle but me talawa', meaning 'I may be small but I've got guts, so look out'. Taking this notion of feistiness and resilience – like black theatre in white society and Talawa's female founders – the company saw its wider aim in terms that would be recognizable from the previous decades: to provide opportunities for black actors, to use black culture to enrich British theatre, and to enlarge theatre audiences among the black community.

Funded initially production by production, Talawa managed to make an impact in its first half-decade of existence, at the end of which it was offered a residency in London. Assisted by Carmen Munroe, Brewster directed the opening production of *The Black Jacobins* at the Riverside Studios. With a cast of some two dozen actors (nineteen of whom were black) led by Norman Beaton as Toussaint, it was an ambitious production that was made possible only because of the GLC grant. Beaton believed the production was a genuine breakthrough for black theatre, not only because of its scale but because of its quality and the predominance of black people in the creative, production and administrative teams.<sup>34</sup> The *Financial Times* said it was a production that, along with other projects in the GLC's *Black Experience* programme, 'lends credibility and dignity to the British black theatre movement'.<sup>35</sup>

Brewster followed this with the British première of Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*, set in Jamaica in 1937 in the aftermath of the murder of a white estates owner, the echo being that of slavery and the bone being that of its inheritors, both black and white. As a programme note says, the play offers a 'panoramic view of the history of black slavery and the continued economic enslavement of the worker'.<sup>36</sup> Through its use, and questioning, of ritual, such as consoling the spirit of the dead, the play not only shows the link between Africa and the Caribbean but raises painful questions about the meaning of, and means of achieving, emancipation. For a British audience, the play was a sharp reminder of the presence and role of history in the racism and discrimination of contemporary society.

Nearly two years later came the next production, *O Babylon!*, by Derek Walcott, with music by Galt McDermot, which deals with the complex cultural and political situation of Rastafarians living in Kingston. In the following year, 1989, came a black-cast version of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the company's first production as a revenue (as opposed to project) client of the Arts Council. The show was a co-production with the Tyne Theatre Company and opened in Newcastle before visiting London and Cork. According to Brewster, it did not amuse the Arts Council. Having cut Temba for, among other things, an integrated cast version of *Ghosts*, the Council now saw Talawa going one step further by tackling what is seen as a quintessentially English comedy (written, however, by an Irishman) with an

all-black cast. Brewster, another 'outsider' like Wilde, saw the play as his attack on the 'barely hidden vulgarities of English snobbery', ideal, therefore, to inspire black actors who had for so long been treated condescendingly as stereotypes.<sup>37</sup> It won the backing of the British Council, which sent it to Ireland as part of the *Britain in Europe* Festival.

A turning point in her approach to theatre was a trip in 1989 to Nigeria, where she researched her forthcoming production of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, a script of which she had found in the children's section of a London bookshop. Rotimi's view of the Oedipus story, or Odewale in his Yoruba version, which he had directed in London more than a decade before, presents the tragedy as Odewale's fault; he chooses to kill his father and marry his mother. In Nigeria, Brewster experienced an integrated vision of performance in contrast to the fractured European approach and, in applying this, considered her revival one of the best productions Talawa ever did.<sup>38</sup> It was a co-production with the Everyman Liverpool featuring Jeffrey Kissoon and was later broadcast on radio. The last two productions in this period were *The Dragon Can't Dance* by Earl Lovelace and *Antony and Cleopatra*. This latter show was another co-production with the Everyman and Talawa's – and Brewster's – first attempt at Shakespeare. Brewster – controversially for some – cast Cleopatra as a black Egyptian Queen (played by Dona Croll, whose only previous Shakespearean experience had been as maids) alongside a black Antony (Jeffrey Kissoon) and a black Octavius Caesar (Ben Thomas).<sup>39</sup> The production rehearsed against the backdrop of the Gulf War, and this context influenced the interpretation of the two cultures at battle in the play, which opened as the war ended. Coming just after Temba's production of *Ghosts*, one of the triggers for the company's demise, *Antony and Cleopatra* was a bold move but one that paid off.

Brewster says recognition by funders, though it brought extra resources, 'clipped her wings' because it carried with it new responsibilities to outside bodies, placing greater demands on and scrutiny of the company, particular in areas such as administration.<sup>40</sup> Collaborations were a key element in Talawa's survival and progress, both because funders encouraged them and because they helped artistic growth, gained new audiences, and marked a degree of acceptance and acknowledgment by the theatre establishment. The reward for this level of work was a residency at the renovated Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre, central London, which seated just more than 300. The move was announced in 1991 when the government ordered the Arts Council to review provision for minority arts, the Roundhouse project and Black Theatre seasons came to an end, Temba was cut, and Tara was forced to abandon its studio as a programmed arts centre. Talawa benefitted, and though the residency raised tension within diasporic theatre, for example, over the disparity between provision for Tara and Talawa, Talawa took on the leadership mantle of black theatre.

The company opened its residency in 1992 with (at Derek Walcott's suggestion) a revival of Soyinka's *The Road*, twenty-seven years after it had been given its world première in London, a reminder, as with Talawa's *The Black Jacobins*, of the heritage of black British theatre. Already regarded as a contemporary classic, *The Road* connects western European theatre forms with an African consciousness in its exploration of

the vibrant but dangerous relationship between life and death focused on a driven professor (Ben Thomas) and his unsuspecting accomplices who operate in a nether world like existential highwaymen. The production represented a massive challenge for Talawa, and, despite its problems – the use of the Egungun mask, for instance, was not altogether successful – it made a powerful statement about the significance of the play and the company's ambition.

During the three-year residency, Talawa raised audience figures from twelve per cent to nearly sixty per cent and produced ten plays.<sup>41</sup> Besides a transfer from the Edinburgh Festival (Footpaul's production of *Mooi Street Moves* by Paul Slabolepszy) and Talawa's first play by a woman – a collage called *The Love Space Demands* by Ntozake Shange (1992), which had been given its première earlier that year in New York – the company presented new plays by Michael Abbenetts (*The Lion*), Tariq Ali (*Necklaces*), and 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas (*Resurrections*); an adaptation of a Jamaican musical, *Arawak Gold*, by Carmen Tipling and Ted Dwyer, which retained Jamaican and British pantomime traditions; and revivals of *Smile Orange* by Trevor Rhone, *From the Mississippi Delta* by Endesha Ida Mae Holland, and *Maskerade* by Sylvia Winter and Olive Lewin, which honoured the Jamaican street festival tradition of Jonkunnu at the heart of the piece. There was also a largely-black-cast production of *King Lear* (1994), which had been intended for Norman Beaton, who fell ill and was replaced by Ben Thomas. The production brought out the themes of generational tension, migration, social alienation, and madness and questioned ways in which authority is used to justify exclusion of those perceived as outsiders. The production opened at the NIA Centre, Manchester before coming to the Cochrane via Barnstaple and Oxford.

The residency was curtailed because, according to Brewster, the landlord, the London Institute, was not keen on Talawa's presence and restricted the available time it could be in occupation.<sup>42</sup> The company decided to leave altogether and pursue its long-term search for a permanent space elsewhere while, in the meantime, taking its productions to a variety of established London venues such as the Lyric, Hammersmith, Young Vic, Brixton's Shaw Theatre, the Tricycle, and Oval House and farther afield to venues such as the Bristol Old Vic. The repertoire mix continued, embracing new plays (for example, Yazmine Judd's lively comedy *Unfinished Business* in 1999 and Grant Buchanan Marshall's *The Prayer* in 2000 about domestic violence); revivals, such as Walcott's farce on cultural imperialism *Beef, No Chicken* (1996); adaptations, for instance, of Roger Mais's novel *Brother Man*, which Kwame Dawes turned into a Rastafarian musical called *One Love* (2001); and reworkings of classics, such as José Triana's *Medea in the Mirror* (1996, Euripides transported to Cuba) and *Othello* (1997). Thinking of both O. J. Simpson and Colin Powell, two leading black figures who discovered that acceptance depended on not crossing certain boundaries, Brewster adapted the Shakespeare text to help her exploration of the black general's downfall in a racist society.

Brewster wanted to leave Talawa a couple of years after the company finished at the Cochrane, but difficulties in finding a successor delayed her departure. Such difficulties continued to dog Talawa: Topher Campbell succeeded Brewster in

2001 but left immediately owing to alleged artistic differences, to be followed by African-American playwright Bonnie Greer but for only three months.<sup>43</sup> At this point, Talawa had great expectations of moving into a new home at the Westminster Theatre in central London, where *Toussaint Louverture* had first been seen. Other plans for the site had been proposed, including one by Anton Phillips, but Talawa's had been chosen and had the backing of grants from the Millennium Commission and the Arts Council worth £3.6 million, which had to be matched by a further £1 million raised by the company itself. Director and playwright Paulette Randall took over from Greer in late 2002 and the next year showed the company still had punch with a vibrant production of *Urban Afro Saxons* by Patricia Elcock and Kofi Agyemang, which challenged notions of Britishness just as the Home Secretary stepped up plans for citizenship tests. Randall had differences with the Board and left in 2005. After a period under interim leader Ben Thomas, Jamaican playwright Pat Crumper was appointed artistic director in 2006 alongside a new chair, Joy Nichols, in an attempt to start anew.

By this time, however, the Westminster plan had fallen apart. There were internal board and management problems at Talawa, which saw several resignations at the company, and the Arts Council withdraw its support for the building project, a decision that infuriated much of the black theatre community. As with the Roundhouse, great promise – and money – had been wasted, and the Council was accused of renegeing again. The possibility of gaining a national black theatre space seemed gone. Funding priorities had shifted in the years since the project was first mooted when a national centre still seemed desirable by all concerned. Diversity and integration were now being promoted by funders, as the old diasporic migration had settled and was being replaced by a white arrivals from central and eastern Europe.

In the first two decades since it was founded, Talawa had produced more than forty plays, drawing on a range of cultures and performance traditions that had been used to explore the meanings of blackness and of Britishness. The company had given a platform to many black practitioners, provided educational, outreach and skills programmes, and launched its Young People's Theatre and Black Writers Group. It had initiated an important oral history project that celebrates the pioneers of black theatre in postwar Britain. Two collections of interviews – *Blackgrounds* (recorded in 1997 and supported by Arts Council England) and *Blackstage* (recorded in 2002 and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund) – and the company's work with the Future Histories project created an invaluable black performing arts archive as a legacy for the future.<sup>44</sup> Talawa also took on the administration of the Alfred Fagon Award for British playwrights of African and Caribbean descent, while, although a reduced force, it continued its various activities as Britain's major black-led theatre company.

## Broader front

Retrenchment in general theatre funding in the 1980s was compounded by a shift in funding in the early 1990s away from theatre to dance and the visual arts; in the

mid-1990s, theatre had suffered a loss of profile and audience numbers. With the introduction of the National Lottery at the end of the decade came an emphasis on buildings (bastions of white theatre and white administrators), but this was followed by favourable adjustments to revenue funding and more weight being given to supporting diversity in the new millennium.<sup>45</sup> The sheer number of groups and initiatives that have been launched since the end of the 1980s makes it impossible to offer a meaningful survey, particularly in the absence of any focus such as the Black Theatre Forum provided. The broad range could run from the likes of Mahogany Carnival Arts (1989), a group of multi-disciplinary artists whose costumes, masks, sculptures, and puppets combine British theatre design with Asian and Caribbean performance traditions and have featured regularly at the Notting Hill Carnival, to further attempts to secure a national centre (for example, the Drum in Birmingham, opened in 1994, or the 1996 plan by Oscar Watson, BTF's co-coordinator who went on to be Talawa's administrator, for a National Black and Asian Theatre Development Centre). The range might also include the likes of Tiata Fahodzi (theatre of the emancipated), created by Femi Elufowoju in 1997 to celebrate West African heritage, or Push, set up in 2001 by Josette Bushell-Mingo and Ruth Nutter to widen the scope of black performance to include street theatre, opera, and circus, or the opening in 2003 of the Identity Drama School, said to be the first such black institution.

Many of the initiatives occurred outside London and away from the mainstream: examples include ARTBLACKLIVE events presented by the Black Arts Alliance, formed in 1985 by a group of community artists, and the longest-surviving network of diasporic artists; performances by Kuffdem in Chapeltown, Leeds; and the work in Birmingham of Barbados-born playwright and director Don Kinch.<sup>46</sup> The moving force behind *Staunch Poets and Players* in London, Kinch went to Birmingham in the late 1980s and developed the Third Dimension Theatre Company, African Peoples Theatre, which performed his *Coming Up for Air* in 1990, and Nu Century Arts (2000) as a resource for new writers, musicians, directors, and actors. Birmingham also has the Drum, built on the site of the former Aston Hippodrome variety theatre as a national centre for diasporic arts. It had a fitful beginning and was fully opened in 1998, with two auditoria, an art gallery, an exhibition space, a cafe-bar, and a multimedia production suite. As happened elsewhere, a central location was denied because the money came from a regeneration fund, thereby reinforcing the status of the project as peripheral and having welfare rather than artistic objectives.

Where diasporic companies did have buildings, they were under-resourced and mostly in culturally and economically deprived areas. Though this kept them out of the mainstream, it did keep them close to the grass roots, which, as the Black Theatre Forum found, was also important because audience remains a critical problem. This is particularly true where there is no tradition either of theatre going or of travelling outside one's own area. In overcoming such obstacles, the white media in general have not helped, whereas in the media that are aimed at diasporic communities, there have been contradictory responses: alternative or grassroots media may have

been supportive, but the main outlets often took the view that its audiences were not keen on seeing on stage the problems they met daily on the streets.<sup>47</sup>

One strand that has managed to find a diasporic audience, however, is the commercial black theatre. Among the most popular of this sector's shows was *Black Heroes in the Hall of Fame* (1987, revived 1992), although it began in north London with a small subsidy from the local council to mark the centenary of Marcus Garvey's birth.<sup>48</sup> The show transferred to a central London entertainment venue (the Astoria) and then toured the United States and reappeared at the Hackney Empire. Created by Jamaican-born producer Flip Fraser, J. D. Douglas (lyrics) and Khareem Jamal (music), the show boasted a cast of some fifty performers who portrayed in a musical pageant important black figures from the worlds of history, entertainment, sport, and politics. By contrast, the major strand in commercial black theatre habitually promotes sexually and politically conservative stereotypes and generally divides the diasporic artistic community. Jamaica's popular comedian and writer, Oliver Samuels, who made his reputation through a TV series *Oliver at Large* and its theatrical spin-offs, enjoys huge support in Britain on his regular visits with bawdy Jamaican comedy, much of it in the everyday language of the islanders. Such Caribbean comedies are also promoted by Brixton Village, founded in 1988, in shows such as *BUPS*, *BUPS 2*, *The Night Before*, and *Undercover Lover*, and by Blue Mountain Theatre, founded in 1989, in shows such as *Betrayed*, *Affairs*, *Smallie*, *Forbidden Love*, *Confessions of a Black Woman*, and *Wicked Bitches* (about King Lear's daughters). Blue Mountain productions play large theatres: Leeds's City Varieties; Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham; Birmingham's Alexandria Theatre, Opera House and Palace Theatre; the Hackney Empire; and the Broadway Theatre, Catford in south London, where the company is based. They make a point of being populist in all aspects of the theatre-going experience, from production style and use of familiar language to marketing and 'good night out' environment at the venues.

The active audience rapport at such shows is the envy of the theatre world but rarely achieved outside children's theatre and pantomime. Comedies such as Ayub Khan-Din's *East is East* achieved similar responses when it played in the East End of London, and Paulette Randall reported gleefully that audiences for *The Pirate Princess* in the Black Theatre season were 'raucous,' which forced performers to adjust, to 'become an ensemble and work with one another and with the audience'.<sup>49</sup> Actor Brian Bovell recounts the difference he found between white and black audiences attending a black play. Of a white audience, as typified at the Royal Court, he says: '...it's a quiet night. At the end of the evening they go. Basically I believe their reactions come off of guilt'. But, the next day 'if you are doing the play for a black audience ... the play becomes a different play. It is live. You are getting response and participation'.<sup>50</sup> Without ignoring cultural specificity, however, this is a class issue that cuts across ethnicity.

Bovell was part of a group called The Posse, whose motto was 'There's no justice, just us'.<sup>51</sup> With the female company Bibi Crew, groups like this chimed with the rise of a black comedy circuit. They introduced a new energized

performance style into diasporic theatre in the early 1990s that was breaking away from old categories and attracting a black audience with sketch-like material, often highly political, rooted in common experience. At the same time, plays such as *Leonora's Dance* (1992) by Zindika and the involvement of diasporic artists and writers in live/performance art and performance poetry such as Patience Agbabi, Susan Lewis, Valerie Mason-John, Michael McMillan, Ronald Fraser-Munro, Sol B. River, Lemn Sissay, Dorothea Smartt, SuAndi, and Benjamin Zephaniah gave impetus to the challenge to conventional theatre. This allowed greater expression of the diversity behind being British with a renewed emphasis on non-naturalistic performance styles, striking visual imagery, and symbolic, poetic use of language and form.

Within the strategies deployed by black and Asian artists, naturalism had played a historic function of being a remedial and provocative force, offering counter images to those that confirmed marginalization and discrimination. Naturalism was powerful when any diasporic presence was made to bear the burden of being representative, but there was the concomitant trap of binary positive/negative images, neither of which are themselves 'natural'. The generation of non-white writers born or raised in Britain continued to test the criticism that naturalism confirmed the status quo and remained at the level of revelation or opposition without being able to reach beyond that to transformation. For many of them, theatre remained a prime medium for presenting the synchronicity of different time and consciousness frames through a dramaturgical approach that embraced naturalism and realism. Memory, history, and intercultural interplay – understandably major motifs of those with diasporic heritage – feature strongly in the work of the likes of Trish Cooke, Tunde Ikoli, Caryl Phillips, and Winsome Pinnock, who deal with discovery of, coming to terms with, and return to one's roots, alongside, and as a part of, exploring what it means to be British.<sup>52</sup>

The artists who wanted to rupture and dispense with naturalism also had historical precedent to draw on, for instance, in the appropriation of minstrelsy to use flamboyance as a weapon of riposte. Integral to such a strategy, and to the continuing debates around developing a black aesthetic, was the African, Asian, and Caribbean heritage that did not separate drama from music and dance. The thrust of this diasporic theatre carried the potency of participatory, multi-genre forms as found in Carnival, resisting the idea of culture as a unified given and seeing it rather as a changing and interconnected set of varied practices. This diasporic approach began to alter the way state agencies perceived art, even if their pyramid of excellence was not entirely pulled down.

A slew of surveys and reports led to a number of state-supported projects focused on diasporic theatre development, such as NATAK in Leicester, BRIT (Black Regional Initiative in Theatre), and the Arts Council of England's Year of Cultural Diversity, but overall there was no consistency or coherent underlying policy.<sup>53</sup> The New Labour government introduced the twin approach of cultural diversity and social inclusion, which embedded an instrumental attitude toward the arts as agents of social change and collapsed together different issues of inequality. For all

the effort, black and Asian theatre continued to suffer many of the problems facing white theatre, in areas such as leadership, finance, new audiences, and new plays but without the support to build mechanisms to overcome systemic difficulties. There have been initiatives to help the supply of new plays, for example, but little to help the revival of existing texts, and diasporic theatre has not yet won the 'right to fail' or to experiment. The gains were sporadic and not deep-rooted; the occasional play by a black writer or the employment of a black director could not hide the absence from the bigger picture.

A report in 2002 from Eclipse, a project that came out of the BRIT scheme and other regional initiatives, found widespread institutional racism in British theatre. The report also found that the few black people who did gain employment had to deal with race issues and were marginalized.<sup>54</sup> Eclipse details the lack of non-white representation among theatre staff, boards, actors, audiences and in programming, the lack of training and the lack of adequate resourcing to reach appropriate audiences.<sup>55</sup> Besides making recommendations, Eclipse mounted its own productions. It found it difficult to set up the first tour, of Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (2003), whereas the second tour, of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (2004), adapted by Dipo Olaboluaje to an African setting, was outsold by Nitro's basketball hip-hop musical, *Slamdunk*. Eclipse gained better audiences with *Little Sweet Thing* (2005), the Roy Williams story of a black ex-convict who tries but fails to break free from a criminal sub-culture, and Matura's *Three Sisters* (2006).

*Whose Theatre...?*, a report prepared in 2006 for the Arts Council of England by Lola (later Baroness) Young based on consultations in Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, London, Manchester, and Nottingham, found that the situation had deteriorated since the mid-1980s, under-resourcing remained a critical issue, and embedded transformation had proved elusive.<sup>56</sup> Despite the greater access of non-white theatre workers to the generality of venues and groups, the access was uneven, and still no major non-race specific company had been non-white-led. The lack of infrastructure required for sustainability led the report to recommend the creation not of a single centre but a network of buildings, along with the professional development of leadership, more international work to be shown, and the Arts Council to overcome the habit of one-off initiatives by taking a coherent, long-term approach, recognizing the need of black and Asian theatre to own its future.

Notwithstanding the problems faced by diasporic artists, the diversity within diverse theatre has been recognized, along with the continuing struggle for self-definition and expression. This struggle is not confined to relations with white communities (whether encountering the obstacles of liberal racism or conservative bias) but involves contestation within and between the diasporic communities themselves, as the *Behzti* affair and other, less-well-publicized confrontations have revealed (involving, for example, the challenge of gay and lesbian diasporic artists).<sup>57</sup> Indeed, there is still a problem concerning the portrayal of fully human diasporic characters, for instance, those who may be involved in criminality or other forms of social dysfunction, for fear of feeding a stereotype.



White theatre, nevertheless, has been provoked, revived, enriched, and changed through casting, repertoire, language, aesthetics, and important shifts in the representation of non-white people.<sup>58</sup> Non-white artists have frequently resisted the diasporic and race tags, but those born or raised in Britain have made the most advances because their number and history, their experiences, and their relationships both to Britain and to their diasporic heritage required different responses. This process is deepened with the changing pattern of immigration and with each subsequent post-colonial generation's becoming further removed, though not necessarily disconnected, from their diasporic roots and the colonial era. The context for this process alters rapidly in a globalized world, as do the terms of the debate about Britishness and its relationship to migration, integration, and cultural difference, a debate that the 2001 September 11 attacks in the United States and the 2005 July bombings in Britain changed radically.

Progress has been made in the theatre, however, although it is always provisional, and much remains to be done to remove the 'raffia' ceiling, despite the holes that have been made in it.<sup>59</sup> It took until 1987 for the West End to host an all-black, non-musical British production under black direction – *The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin, produced by the Carib Theatre and directed by Anton Phillips in a transfer from the subsidized Tricycle Theatre – but such an event proved a rarity. It was not until 2005 that a play by a black Briton, Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen*, appeared in the West End.<sup>60</sup> There have been other individual breakthroughs. Venu Dhupa, for instance, was made executive director of Nottingham Playhouse in 1997 and went on to important roles at the National Endowment for Science, Technology, and the Arts and the British Council. Kully Thiarai, was appointed joint co-artistic director with Paul Kerryson of the Leicester Haymarket in 2001. The RSC presented a black Shakespearean King (David Olewyo played Henry VI in 2000), London applauded a black Hamlet (Adrian Lester in Peter Brook's 2001 visit), and pantomime discovered a remarkable black Dame (Clive Rowe first played the role at the Hackney Empire in 2004).

Midway through the first decade of the new millennium came a moment when such diversity was celebrated in the media: plays by writers Kwei-Armah, Roy Williams, and Debbie Tucker Green were on tour round Britain, in the West End and, at the National Theatre, the RSC and Royal Court; the Globe Theatre presented a season on Islam and Shakespeare; and a production of *Twelfth Night* set in India with an all-Asian cast was seen at the Albery Theatre.<sup>61</sup> Before the decade had finished, Kwei-Armah had joined the board of the National Theatre and launched there the Black Theatre Archive whereas that redoubt of diverse theatre, the small Tricycle Theatre, which has presented six plays by African-American playwright August Wilson, followed its experiment with a black ensemble company staging three British premières of African-American plays by mounting in 2009 a trilogy of work by Kwei-Armah, Williams, and Bola Agbaje in a season aptly titled *Not Black and White*.<sup>62</sup>

None of this heralded a new dawn, but it did mark a shift and demonstrate that those with roots in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean had made – and were to go

on making – a distinctive, ineradicable theatrical contribution to multicultural, variegated, and colour-ful Britain and to the continuing debate on what it means to be human and British.

## Conclusion

This complex negotiation between 'us' and 'them' runs through the entire history of black and Asian theatre in Britain and is a central strand in the wider history of British theatre. Even during the early era, dominated by the attraction of the exotic and fear of the Other, the consequent representations and changing, volatile role of colour as a sign of difference return insistently to the issue of 'who we are' and the associated question 'who are we?'

For non-white artists trying to tackle the question, the absence from – and even of – history has meant a responsibility to the pressure of history, the pressure of being representative. At first this was felt by individuals needing to demonstrate their value, but individuals alone were never going to comprise black and Asian theatre. This required the interplay of the individual and the collective. It meant – and means – not simply presence (though that was hard enough, and necessary) but a distinct approach and attitude, an intervention. It means having to balance the risks of independence against accommodation with the theatre establishment and its funders and couching one's aims in terms that allow access to resources even if that substitutes race relations for art. It means recognizing the necessary link and tension between art and community, knowing it is a link the artist has to make and a tension the artist has to embrace. It means a battle to be taken seriously as artists while operating within a white imaginary that still mistrusts the Other.

Throughout the history of black and Asian theatre in Britain, truths have been sought in an impressive range of interventions and strategies. Diasporic artists have exploited both prevailing stereotypes, which have accumulated over centuries, and the adverse expectations attached to them as well as promoting alternative systems of representation and signification. In the process of fighting for control over one's own representation, the construction of identity has been wrested bit by bit from the colonizing culture, but this struggle is not over.

Black and Asian theatre has created a network of artists and groups distinguished by their own methods, their own values, and their own body of work. Black and Asian theatre has borrowed from, added to, and changed the dominant culture. Through a new aesthetic that draws strength from but transcends racial, geographical, and artistic boundaries, the canon has been re-envisioned and revitalized while new stories and players have been introduced. By doing this from the margins and restoring the challenging meaning of being on the edge, black and Asian theatre has added its weight to the reconfiguration of what was seen as peripheral. Black and Asian theatre has thereby transformed notions not only of British theatre but also of black and Asian theatre itself and notions of a new, devolving Britain, struggling to find a new 'we' and new ways of thinking and behaving.